

The Alexander Thomson Society Newsletter

Nº28, FEBRUARY 2001



**'Discovering
the Egyptian' in
Egyptian Halls**

Cases

Glasgow Cross

AFTER THE shameful saga which eventually culminated in the disgraceful demolition of the Thomson & Turnbull warehouse in Bell Street, it is good to be able to report that there are plans to preserve and restore the surviving companion building which still stands forlorn in Watson Street.

A scheme for the development of the whole site bounded by Bell Street, Watson Street, Gallowgate and the High Street has been prepared by our own Mark Baines in association with Gholami & Craig, architects. This envisages a mixed development of shops, flats and an hotel and involves the retention and restoration of the Watson Street warehouse together with the re-erection of the magnificent doorcase salvaged by the heroic Roger Guthrie from the Bell Street building.

Negotiations are proceeding with Glasgow City Council, part-owners of the site, to try and overcome the obstacle of part of the site in Bell Street being owned by a delinquent developer notorious for his destructive involvement with historic buildings in the city.

Meanwhile, Alba Town / Leith Developments Ltd is now to press ahead with the first phase, which is the restoration and conversion of the Watson Street



warehouse to give impetus to a project which deserves to succeed.

The St Vincent Street Church

IT IS heartening to see the tower shrouded in scaffolding and the crude cement repairs of the 1960s being replaced by new indented stone. The replacement of the GRP urn on the summit of the dome by a proper stone urn is planned for January 10th, 2001.

Close inspection of the stonework reveals that while some stones retain a hard surface and sharp details, others have weathered badly and the sandstone is disintegrating. It was, of course, vanity for Thomson to have supposed he could build for eternity, but one

wishes that he could have used Aberdeen granite rather than weak and variable Giffnock sandstone. The restoration therefore involves philosophical problems over how to treat the new stone and how much weathered stone to retain. This arises in particular over the 'caryatids' which frame the opening below the clock-faces (or, properly, 'cherubim' if we are to accept that these impassive giant heads, carved by J. & G. Mossman derive from the description of Moses' tabernacle in the Book of Exodus). Several of these – particularly on the north face of the tower – are badly eroded and most have sustained damage to their noses.

In a report dated 5th December, Historic Scotland recommend replacing lost features with new stone on the

most damaged cherubim, but we tend to agree with Page & Park, architects, that new noses could only look conspicuous and unfortunate and that it is best gently to remove loose fragments and dirt with a soft brush and to consolidate the sculptures as they stand. After all, the design of these features survives intact in some cherubim and it is necessary to accept the fact of weathering and decay over time. Besides, these features are works of art and replacing them is of a different order to recreating incised decoration on new stonework.

Meanwhile, the future of Heron House remains problematic. We had hoped that this adjacent and now empty tall building – by Derek Stephenson & Partners, 1967-71 – which does such damage to the skyline of Glasgow and blocks the view of Thomson's steeple from the south-east, would be demolished owing to its poor structural condition, but now, after uncertainty over redevelopment proposals by Standard Life, it has been bought by a developer who proposes to reclad the ailing concrete structure and make it into an hotel. A crude recladding scheme has been prepared by Gilbert Associates.

The essential problem with Heron House is that no new building on the site would be given planning permission to go so high in such a sensitive



location – at least, we would hope not, even with Glasgow City Council – and would therefore be smaller in cubic volume, so there is a commercial advantage in retaining the present structure.

The advantage of retaining Heron House is that in these circumstances money has been offered towards the St Vincent Street Church and that the hotel might be able to make use of the basement of the church, ensuring an income for future maintenance. The disadvantage is that a structure we would be much better of without will be given a new lease of life so that Thomson's magnificent steeple will not be able to stand proud as an unchallenged landmark for several decades. Heron

House is an interesting building of its time and would be acceptable if it were somewhere else. As it is, it is an insult and a brute.

The Alexander 'Greek'

Thomson Trust has reluctantly accepted the current proposal for recladding Heron House because of the benefits it may bring to the restoration project, and we are reluctant to oppose the Trust in its good work. However, in all honesty, we can only agree with the compelling argument made by Charles Prosser, Secretary of the Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland, in a letter sent to Glasgow City Council on 19th October:

'The St Vincent Street Church is of international importance... It might be conjectured that should an application for Heron House as it exists be made at this time, it must be refused because it is now appreciated that the height and mass of Heron House so damage the setting and the character of the Church that no amount of attention to detail could mitigate their impact acceptably...

Should Heron House have to be retained for commercial reasons in the short-term it should be renovated only in its designed form maintaining all the features that made it acceptable at the time of its construction. These ameliorating elements are lost, along with any claim to architectural integrity, in the muddled ideology of the recladding scheme. As a result, the current sheet metal and glass cladding proposals would certainly be worse in terms of



visual impact upon the public than Derek Stephenson's attempt in a less enlightened period to plan and design the setting of an historic building of supreme significance.

For the above reasons, the Commission strongly opposes this application. The Commission regards the City's principal duty, at this stage, to the monument of St Vincent Street Church as encouraging the demolition of Heron House and replacing it with responsibly controlled and expertly planned buildings and open spaces."

Quite.

Wellington Street / West Regent Street

THOMSON HAS the dubious honour of having altered and worked in a building which, by becoming the first subject of an appeal

under the European Bill of Human Rights, has called the whole system of planning inquiries into question – first in Scotland and now in England as well [see *Newsletter No.27*]. The Scottish Executive has appealed against the decision by Lord McFadyen in the Court of Sessions which resulted in the cancellation of the planned public inquiry into the proposals by County Properties to redevelop the site.

Meanwhile, the threatened building still stands (*above*), and solicitors acting for Historic Scotland have written to Glasgow Council setting out the opinion that no consent to demolish is in place (other than that unfortunately granted a decade ago tied to the flawed replica scheme). Lord McFadyen recognised that it

was proper to call in the application for listed building consent to demolish. If the Scottish Executive wins the appeal, the call-in goes ahead as planned – although it may be under a different system, or with Historic Scotland excluded (possibly giving more weight to us as an objector, therefore).

The main worry is time together with the Glasgow climate. It may be two years before a decision is reached and meanwhile the much-abused building so cleverly enlarged by Thomson continues to decay. As always, one of the chief dangers to historic buildings in the city is the Council's department of Building Control.

The following letter from solicitor Murray Shaw offers another insight.

Dear Sir

COUNTY PROPERTIES

I read with interest the article in the County Properties case in the edition of the *Newsletter* dated 27 September 2000. I would, however, make the following points:

1. The effect of the Human Rights Act 1998 is to make it unlawful for a public authority to act in a way which is incompatible with a convention right and to make such unlawful actings capable of being the subject of proceedings before UK Courts rather than being taken to the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. At least potentially therefore, County Properties could have pursued this matter even if the Human Rights Act had not been enforced.

2. Before Lord Macfadyen, the Scottish Executive conceded that in the circumstance of this case, a part-time Reporter appointed by the Scottish Executive did not constitute an impartial or independent tribunal as required by the Convention. The Scottish Executive argued that this failing which they conceded was rectified by the fact there was an Appeal to the Court of Session. Lord Macfadyen simply held that as the right of appeal to the Court of Session was so limited (the Court could not revisit the facts) this did not rectify the lack of an impartial independent tribunal conceded by the Scottish Executive.

3. There is a comment in the last paragraph which appears to me

to suggest that you are of the view that "Westminster has not" signed up to the Convention. This is incorrect. With effect from 2 October, the Convention is directly enforceable in the Courts in England. The only difference between Scotland and England is that due to the way the devolution settlement operates in Scotland, the Scottish Executive have required to comply with the Convention since devolution became effective a couple of years ago.

The true villain in this matter, in my view, is the Government who, having chosen to bring the European Convention into UK domestic law, did not give any proper consideration as to the consequences and what steps should be taken to review the planning system to make it compliant. You might be interested to know that in report published by the Environment Transport and Regional Affairs Committee in the House of Commons (dealing with the planning system in England) the Government's attitude was criticised, the Committee was of the view that the role of the Government was to provide leadership and it was for the Government to take steps to ensure that the planning system was compatible with the Human Rights Act rather than "simply waiting to be told by a Court that it is not".

As a Solicitor, no doubt I will be accused of having a vested interest. I am aware, however, in acting for clients in

circumstances where the close relationship between various public bodies leads to a suspicion that discussions take place which undermine the fairness and open-ness of the planning system. That, in my view, raises concerns. In the circumstances of the County Properties case (which I had no involvement in) it is of course noticeable that Glasgow Council had already agreed to grant planning permission.

One way in which the problems highlighted by the County Properties case could be avoided would be for decisions to be made by Reporters rather than the Scottish Executive and for those Reporters to be given some form of "security of tenure" so there would be no doubts about their impartiality.

You should be aware that the Scottish Executive has in fact appealed this Decision to the Inner House, though given the concession made by them (which was pivotal in the case) I personally find it difficult to see that the Inner House of the Court of Session could overrule the Decision.

Yours sincerely

Murray Shaw

Interpreting the Egyptian Halls

A discussion between David Page and Gavin Stamp

IN MY description of the Egyptian Halls in the recent book on Alexander 'Greek' Thomson, I quoted David Page making the suggestion [page 104] that in Union Street

"Thomson was here presenting a tangible exposition of his architectural beliefs, 'a series of idealized "origin statements" layering them in slices of "infinite width" and ordering them vertically in increasing levels of perfection.' And if this is so," I continued, " – and if the eaves gallery storey represents the perfection of the Greek ideal – then that extraordinary cornice above, while conforming to the laws on which Greek architecture rested, can only have been intended to demonstrate the necessity for transcending precedent to achieve something truly original."

These thoughts had been provoked by a letter from David Page, dated 14th May 1998, in which he applied to the façade of the Egyptian Halls that brilliant, empathetic analytical method by which he had earlier explored the symbolism used by C.R. Mackintosh on the former *Glasgow Herald* building [now the Lighthouse. See *Newsletter* N°XX]. Our discussion had been stimulated by Edward Taylor's investigation of the proportional systems used in the St Vincent Street Church [published in *Newsletters* 25, 26 & 27], by reading Thomson's Haldane Lectures [published by the Society in the collection of all his lecture texts, entitled *The Light of Truth and Beauty*] and by David Page's



"loose thought that Thomson via Honeyman to Mackintosh are linked by more than simple respect and formal virtuosity. That between them, and possibly others, there existed a conceptual empathy (unique to Glasgow I don't know), underpinned by the opportunity of symbolic representation in their work and acceptance of it by the patrons they served. Edward's geometric constructions of the St Vincent Street Church, and if he is right, its embedded Solomon's seal, perhaps confirms Graeme Andrew's studies of the observatory of Honeyman of 1884 [the Coats Observatory at Paisley], with its embedded star and furthermore gives credence to Eleanor Gregh's studies of the Hill House. Geometry then served as a supreme ordering structure for most architects, what is significant here is, the extra Glaswegian 'artistic soul', Thomson's faith, Honeyman's science and Mackintosh's spirit."

David Page then asked, "Why are the Egyptian Halls called the Egyptian Halls?" [I did not then know the answer: that, as a bazaar-cum-shopping centre-cum-exhibition space, the building was probably named by the developer, J.H. Robertson, after the Egyptian Halls in Piccadilly, London, opened in 1812] and observed that it was built

"between the Scott University and the Haldane Lectures. In his 1866 talk ideas, if not sentences, are restated and remoulded by 1874. The Haldane talks didn't simply pop out of his head at the end of his life. They, like his architecture, find evolution and refinement through time. He is in fact consistent. Locked between these talks is one of his finest works, the Egyptian Halls. My question, does it have didactic purpose? Furthermore,

Thomson's daunting precision of argument (to an architect) does not allow or would not seem to allow the possibility of loose association of word and form. The puzzle is then how the Egyptian Halls can be so called when there is no 'Egyptian' to be seen."

Page then pointed out that the free-standing columns on the top, eaves gallery storey of the building are modelled on the Corinthian order of the Tower

of the Winds, with subtle alterations typical of Thomson [see the description of the capital in his third Haldane Lecture, on Greek architecture, on page 155 of *The Light of Truth and Beauty*].

"What shocked me," [Page continued] "is Thomson (of the Haldane lecture) wouldn't have anything to do with such collaging of styles on an element. My presumption might have fused the decorative Egyptian line

work with the Greek column form. But no, Thomson goes on in his text to identify another

Corinthian column on the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates. What interests us here is not the column itself but his absolute refutation that it found its original source anywhere but in Greece."

Page then quoted Thomson quoting James Fergusson in *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* of 1855 [see page 156] before continuing that

"what surprises, is Thomson denies it totally... [see pages 156 & 157] ... Clearly there is no Egyptian up there on the Corinthian capitals of the Egyptian Halls."

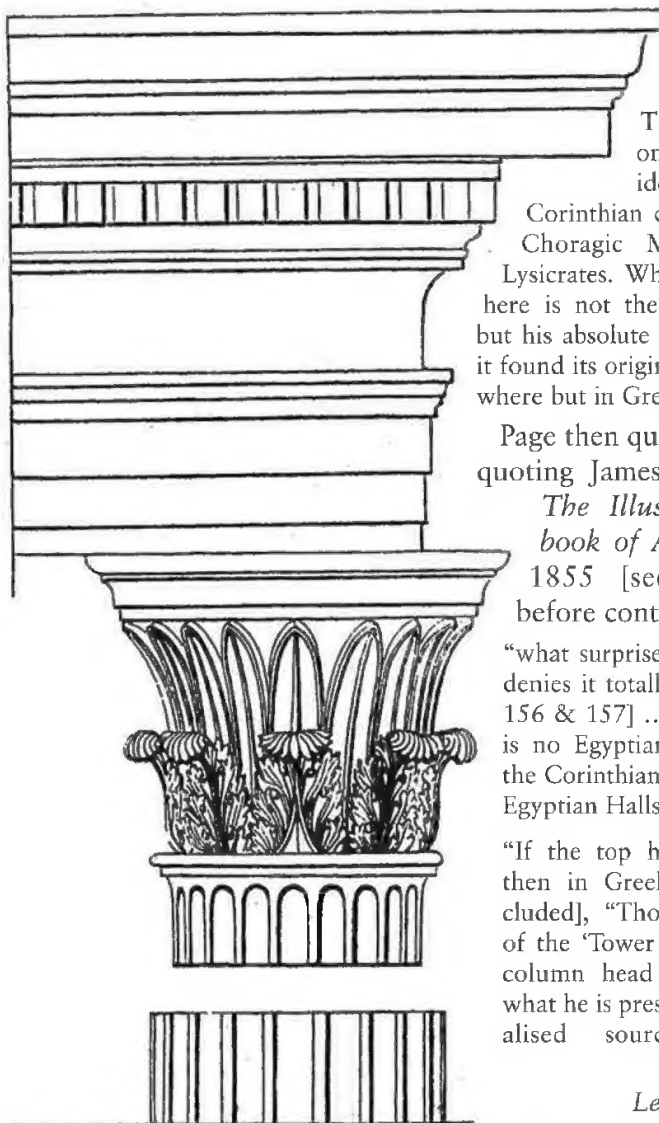
"If the top horizontal slice then in Greek" [Page concluded], "Thomson's choice of the 'Tower of the Winds' column head suggests that what he is presenting are idealised sources of his

architectural beliefs. This thought is perhaps supported by the first floor column heads which appear to be derived from the Greek Aeolic capital... He therefore seems to be constructing a series of idealised 'origin statements' layering them in slices of 'infinite' width and ordering them vertically in increasing levels of perfection."

What, therefore, do we have in Union Street?

"So reading Egyptian Halls, the base is that Egyptian origin, the 'simple form... cut out' [see page 176 of *The Light of Truth and Beauty*] ... with no column... The column above at first floor level is the first decorated 'Greek' column eternalised; i.e., it is not Assyrian. Above it, the second floor double pilasters, holds leaves 'raffled like the leaf of the Roman Corinthian' [page 155] from the Tower of the Winds (obviously before the Romans) and at the top cumulative perfection. At the base the voided plinth wall with no 'Egyptian' column and at the top the perfect 'Greek' Corinthian column, and between the Greek not Assyrian or Egyptian (or Roman) steps to the Corinthian perfection at the top. Wall and column - Egyptian Wall, Greek Column. The Haldane Lectures are full of 'Darwinian' origin thoughts. It perhaps should not surprise us that the scientific discoveries of Darwin should find form in the assertion of Thomson of his own origin architectural statements..."

In my response to these stimulating and original speculations, I wondered whether that magnificent oversailing cornice on



Left: Corinthian Order from the Tower of the Winds from Fergusson's *Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* (London, 1855)

the Egyptian Halls – “the noblest in Europe” according to Thomas Gildard; so novel and form, and brilliantly scaled to both the colonnade beneath and the whole height of the building – was intended to demonstrate that even “Corinthian perfection” was not enough, and that it represented true originality according to Thomson’s eternal, God-given laws? And then I implored David Page to develop his ideas further.

Now he has done so, and we are pleased to publish David Page’s letter to me, of 7th November 2000.

Why is there not a perfect Greek Corinthian column on the top floor of the Egyptian Halls?

We know Thomson remained consistent in his thinking. In fact your publication of the 1853 lecture [‘The Sources and Elements of Art...’ in *The Light of Truth and Beauty*] confirms that linearity of thought. He identifies in it the perfect Corinthian column [page 33]:

“The other Monument, that of Lysicrates, which is circular in form, is probably the most exquisite bit of ornamental design in existence and generally considered the type of the Corinthian order; indeed if we except the Tower of the Winds, which is comparatively rude, this is the only example of that order of a purely Greek character now to be found in Greece.”

Twenty one years on, in the key Haldane lecture [No. III: Greek Architecture], Thomson says [page 155]: “Besides the

Doric and Ionic styles, the Greeks had what is termed the Corinthian, of which there are only two examples”, one which he goes onto describe [page 156]:

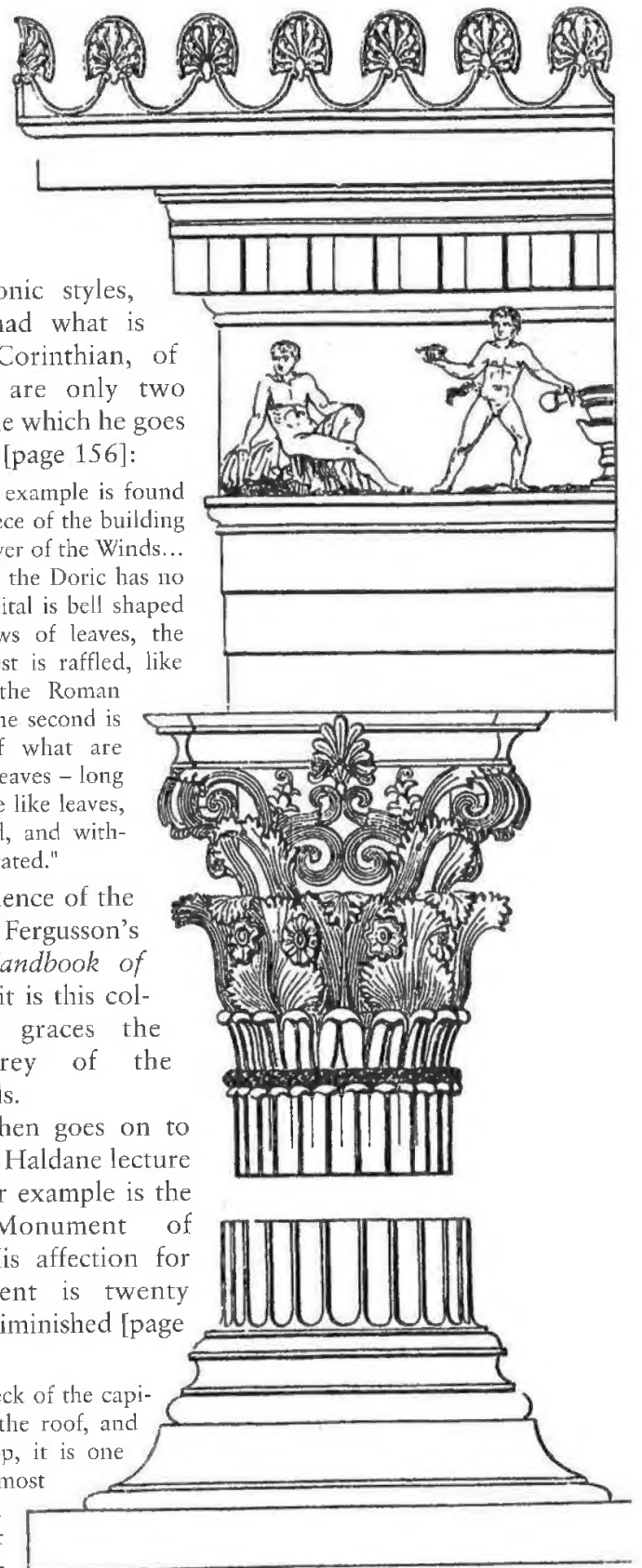
“The plainest example is found in the doorpiece of the building called the Tower of the Winds... The shaft like the Doric has no base. The capital is bell shaped with two rows of leaves, the first, or lowest is raffled, like the leaf of the Roman Corinthian; the second is composed of what are called water leaves – long smooth, sedge like leaves, sharp pointed, and without being serrated.”

On the evidence of the illustration in Fergusson’s *Illustrated Handbook of Architecture*, it is this column which graces the highest storey of the Egyptian Halls.

Thomson then goes on to repeat in that Haldane lecture that the other example is the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates. His affection for the monument is twenty years on, undiminished [page 157]:

“From the neck of the capital, all over the roof, and up to the top, it is one blaze of the most beautiful ornament ever conceived by the imagination or executed by the hand of man.”

Thomson – and here is the nub of the puzzle – chooses the



Right: Corinthian Order from the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates from Fergusson’s *Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* (London, 1855)

first, the plainer type from the Tower of the Winds, not the second, the most beautiful Corinthian capital from the Choragic Monument, for the Egyptian Halls.

Why did he not choose the perfect column?

I would speculate that the perfect column is indeed there but on the next again tier: the tier in our imagination. The façade as a whole is to be read as a journey in the Greek style to discover architectural perfection – a journey's end untainted by association with precedent.

The Egyptian Question, or why an ostensibly Greek detailed building gets an Egyptian name.

Crucial to Thomson's Haldane lecture is the repeated assertion of the autonomy of the Greek style. At the beginning he says [page 141]:

"It has been customary for writers on architecture to say that the architecture of the Greeks was derived from that of the Egyptians."

Later he writes [page 156]:

"how absurd it is to assume that every fine thing which the creative faculty of the Greeks has produced must necessarily have been copied from or suggested by some crude material object, invented long before by the primitive workmen of Egypt or Assyria, while indulging their quaint untutored fancies."

Repeatedly he disassociates the Greek style and its 'origins' from any sequential development path [page 143]:

"... I may mention poetry, rhetoric, sculpture, and architec-



ture. In each of these branches the Greek mind showed an amount of creative energy quite sufficient to render it independent..."

But at the same time Thomson does not, however, deny the contribution of the Egyptian, for he continues:

"Now, I do not mean to say the Greeks learned nothing from the Egyptians; far from it."

Why does he raise this issue of pedigree at all?

The answer may lie in the intellectual challenge to mid-19th century Britain of Darwin's exploration and publication of his ideas on evolution. For deeply thinking Christians,

the world was founded on a specific moment and ideal place, namely the Act of Creation and the Garden of Eden. The discovery by some that the perfect form of mankind may have evolved and not been made by God would have been seen as a staggeringly dangerous erosion of the glue holding British society together.

For Thomson faith in the Greek architectural style was equivalent to faith in his religion [page 142]:

"No people before or since, have achieved such a splendid series of triumphs in every department of human effort to which they thought fit to direct their energies. The people most nearly resembling them were the Jews who occupied a less varied, but certainly not a less important sphere. The Jews and the Greeks were both small nations but each fulfilled a mission to mankind the influence of which will be felt throughout the world and to the end of time. Through the Jews we received the Oracles of God, and amongst them also at the appointed time, appeared the Saviour, proclaiming his Gospel of Peace, and setting before us the example of a noble life here with the assurance of endless bliss hereafter; through the Greeks we have art and philosophy, which with religion, constitute the chief basis of that condition of life which it is now our great privilege to enjoy."

Therefore by implication, the erosion of religious faith by acceptance of the evolutionary suggestion was as deeply problematic as its architectural equivalent. Calling the building



Egyptian Halls tackled this intellectual challenge face on, almost as if a contemporary church might have been called the 'Beagle Building'.

The architectural form of this intellectual challenge to the origin of form.

James Fergusson, as quoted by Thomson in the Haldane lectures, proffers and stokes the evolutionary argument. Describing the perfection of the Corinthian column in the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates [page 156], Fergusson claims that "it is in fact a composite order, made up of the bell shaped capital of the Egyptians and the spiral of the Assyrians." Thomson retorts,

"Now, what resemblance can be traced between the solid beams in low relief upon the Egyptian lotus or papyrus capitals and the fiercely relieved, deeply incised acanthus leaf, intermingled with flowers or between the rude non-descript scrolls of the Assyrian, and the elegant combination of leaves, tendrils and flowers in the upper part of this capital, I cannot comprehend."

Looking closely at the Egyptian Halls, it can be seen

that the "fiercely relieved deeply incised acanthus leaf, intermingled with flowers" can be seen on the second storey of the Egyptian Halls. And furthermore, it is that "elegant combination of leaves, tendrils and flowers" and not Assyrian scrolls that can be seen on the first floor. For Thomson we can now see that the perfect Choragic Monument Corinthian, which he asks us to imagine, is composed of indigenous Greek scrolls on the first floor, acanthus leaf assembly on the second and the early "rude" combination of the Tower of the Winds columnar form on the third, attic storey.

There is of course in the simple forms of the ornamental detail on the Egyptian Halls some deliberate association with earlier precedent; i.e., on the ground floor with the simple plane openings, entitled Egyptian for clarity (using the building name), on the first, the apparent echo of the Assyrian "scroll", or on the second the possible association with the "Egyptian lotus or papyrus capital". It is, however, an

association by text and form which in being suggested is profoundly denied.

In fact, if the façade is simply looked at in numerical terms, you find four bays constitute the ground floor, three engaged columns assert the first floor Greek derived scroll floral assembly, two pilasters propose the Greek acanthus second floor colonnade, and one "rude" Corinthian column completes the composition. Four, three, two, one – steps to Corinthian perfection found in the imaginary colonnade above the four storey building.

During the latter twenty years of his life Thomson had represented his faith in his architecture. Here at the Egyptian Halls, he pursues an argument for it and shows how to achieve "the most beautiful Ornamentation conceived by man": the perfect Corinthian. Indeed it could be said that the Egyptian Halls is the Haldane lectures. Moreover it is Thomson's counter position in architectural terms to the emerging mid-19th century debate on evolution.

Side-lights on Egyptian Halls

THE MITCHELL Library's new Virtual Mitchell website attempts to display a sample of the many thousands of photographic images from its collections. The project, partly funded by the Scottish office Challenge Fund and Unilever plc, has involved digitising the images and making them available on-line.

It's only a small selection of the whole, of course, some of the captioning could be improved (these are both numbered '136-8 Union Street' rather than 84-100) – and the sole image of the Cairney Building in Bath Street is shown back-to-front – but it's likely to prove an invaluable resource for city historians and people who just like looking at historical Glasgow photographs, and who can now order them on-line as well.

These two images of Egyptian Halls show what's important about the collection: dating from 1938, they show the building's shop-fronts before modernisation and, more importantly, detailing from the main entrance doors, now lost.



Find out more from
www.mitchelllibrary.org/vm/

By DOMINIC D'ANGELO

Mary Kingsley, George Thomson and the malaria line

MARY KINGSLEY (right), the daughter of George Kingsley and Mary Bailey, and the niece of Charles Kingsley, was born in Islington in 1862. Her father, a doctor, worked for the Earl of Pembroke. Both men had a love of travelling and together they produced a book of their foreign journeys, *South Sea Bubbles*. Mary's mother was an invalid and Mary was expected to stay at home and look after he, so she had little formal schooling, although she did have access to her father's large library of travel books.

When her father was at home, Mary agreed to help him with a proposed book on the customs and laws of people in Africa. She was given the task of making notes on relevant material from his large collection of books on the subject.

In 1891, George Kingsley returned to England after a journey suffering from rheumatic fever. With both her parents invalids, Mary took complete control over the running of the household. Mary even subscribed to the journal, *English Mechanic*, so that she could carry out repairs on their house.

George Kingsley died in February 1892, followed five weeks later by Mary's mother. With an income of £500 a year, Mary was now herself able to travel. She decided to visit Africa to collect the material needed to enable her to finish



off the book her father had started, and she offered to collect tropical fish for the British Museum while touring the continent.

Mary Kingsley arrived at Sao Paulo de Luanda in Angola in August, 1893. She lived with local people who taught her how to fish using nets made of pineapple fibre. She returned in 1895 to study cannibal tribes,

travelling by canoe up the Ogowe River where she collected specimens of formerly unknown fish. After meeting the cannibal Fan or Fang tribes she climbed the 13,760 feet Mount Cameroon by a route unconquered by any other European, and became the first European woman to climb the 'Throne of Thunder'.

Kingsley's first book about her experiences, *Travels in West Africa* (1897) was an immediate best-seller. In her second book, *West African Studies* (1899) she described the laws and customs of the people in Africa and explained how best they could be governed. Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, wrote to Kingsley seeking her advice. However, Kingsley had become a controversial figure, so he asked her to keep their meetings secret.

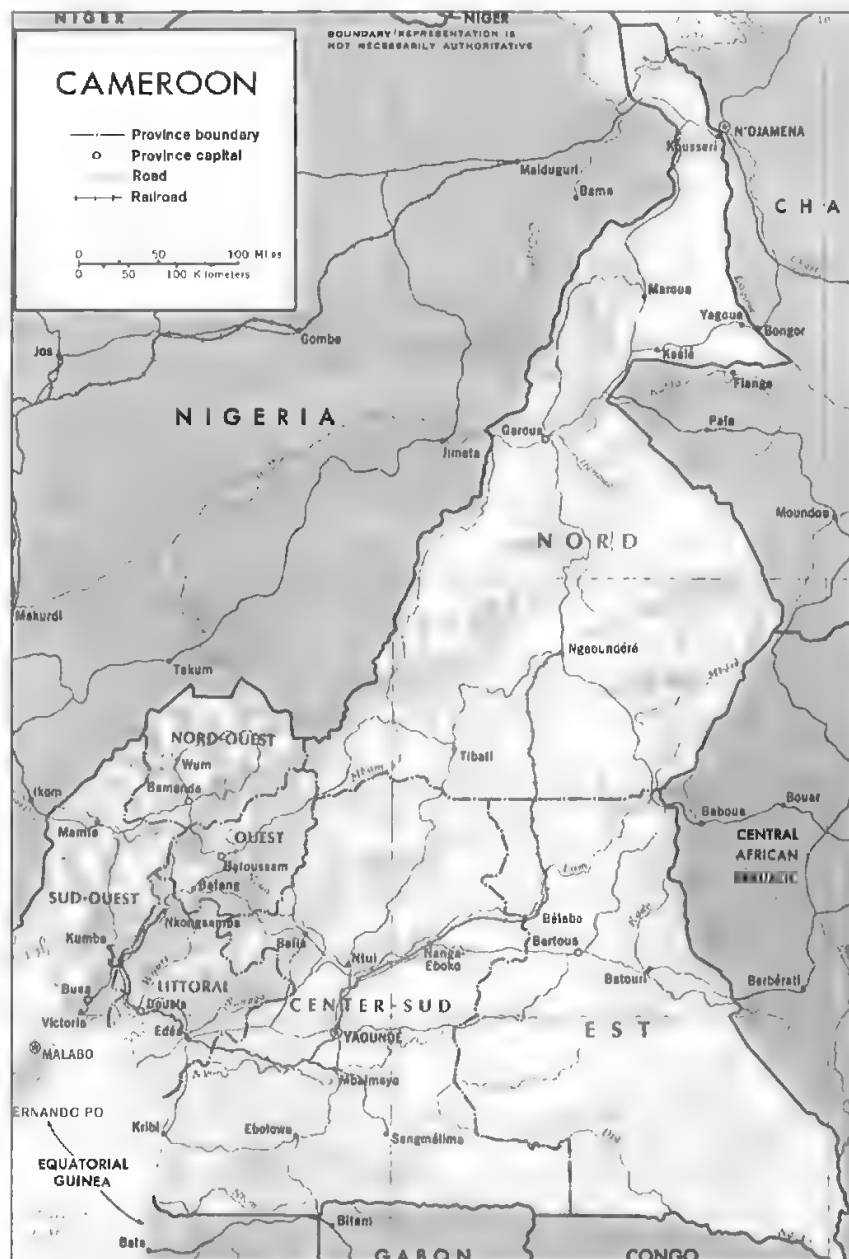
The controversy surrounding Mary Kingsley stemmed from her forthright views, forcefully expressed. On landing at Liverpool after her first journey, she was greeted by journalists who interviewed her about her experiences and made her a household name. Over the next three years she toured Britain giving lectures on life in Africa. In her talks she challenged the views of "stay at home statesmen, who think the Africans are awful savages or silly children – people who can only be dealt with on a reformatory penitentiary line."

She upset the Church of England by criticising missionaries for trying to change the people of Africa. She defended polygamy and other aspects of African life, and argued that a "black man is no more an undeveloped white man than a rabbit is an undeveloped hare."

She angered the Temperance Society by defending the alcohol trade in Africa. The African, she argued, is "by no means the drunken idiot his so-called friends, the Protestant missionaries, are anxious, as an excuse for their failure in dealing with him, to make out."

It was during her 1895 journey to Cameroon that Mary Kingsley came across the sanatorium built at Buea by George Thomson, Alexander's architect brother turned missionary, who had died in Victoria in 1878.

Merchants had set up trading stations along the Cameroons coast during the 17th century (the name comes from Rio das Camerões – 'river of prawns' – the name given by Portuguese traders to the estuary of the Wuori river, to the south of Mount Cameroon). British traders and missionaries had arrived in force after 1845, and both the Germans and the British began exploring inland from 1860. In 1884, the Germans established a protectorate over the Douala area; the British, taken by surprise, offered no resistance.



As today, malaria was a constant threat both to the inhabitants and to the early foreign missionaries sent into West Africa. It was only in the late 1870s, when large quantities of the malaria suppressant quinine became available, that missionaries could move deeper away from the coastal regions and into the interior. George Thomson's sanatorium at Buea was designed to offer a temporary haven for missionaries and, at 3,000 ft, was supposed to be above the 'fever line', a concept

of which Ms Kingsley thought little. Given her views on missionaries, on temperance and on his contribution to Cameroon architecture, it seems unlikely that they would have got on.

In *Travels in West Africa*, Mary Kingsley tells of the founding of Victoria (now Limbe), the capital of Cameroon. It was established by Baptists driven from the Spanish-held island of Fernando Po by an 1858 proclamation that no religious profession other than that of

the Roman Catholic Church would be tolerated. But she rejected the prevailing belief in the healthy nature of the country surrounding Amba Bay.

"The idea that a sanatorium might be built high on the mountain, above the so-called fever line – a line that is merely an imaginative figment, for local conditions alter it in every separate place – at first seemed reasonable, but a closer knowledge of the peculiar meteorological conditions of the great mountain has proved this idea also to be an erroneous one.

"A very noble and devoted Scotch gentleman named Thomson, possessed of considerable wealth and anxious to do what he could to aid the mission work of the United Presbyterians in Calabar [in neighbouring Nigeria], came out and did his best to establish a sanatorium where the fever-stricken missionaries from Calabar could come and recruit their health without having to make the voyage home to England. The station he established upon the mountain at the elevation of 3,000 feet is now occupied by a Roman Catholic mission, and their health has been little, if at all, better than that of other Roman Catholics at a lower level.

"I say other Roman Catholics advisedly, because these missionaries live, as a rule, in a more healthy way than members of other missions in West Africa. The reasons why the upper slopes of Mungo do not afford the healthiness expected of them are many. Chief among them is the exceedingly heavy rainfall.

At Babundi, I am told, there was a panic a short time ago among the natives because there was no rain for an entire week, and this extraordinary phenomenon gave rise to the idea that something serious had gone wrong with Nature and that something was going to happen, but a calm business man told me this story must be without foundation, because it has never been dry for a week at Babundi.

"The reason of the heavy rainfall and drenching mists which fall on the mountain is that it is surrounded by enormous steaming swamps: to the north by those of the Rio del Rey and Calabar, to the south by those of the Cameroon, Mungo, and Bimbia Rivers, while its superior height catches the heavy, water-laden clouds floating in from the Atlantic. In addition to this, the cold air rushes down its sides in draughts that condense the water in the hot overlaid lower layers of the atmosphere.

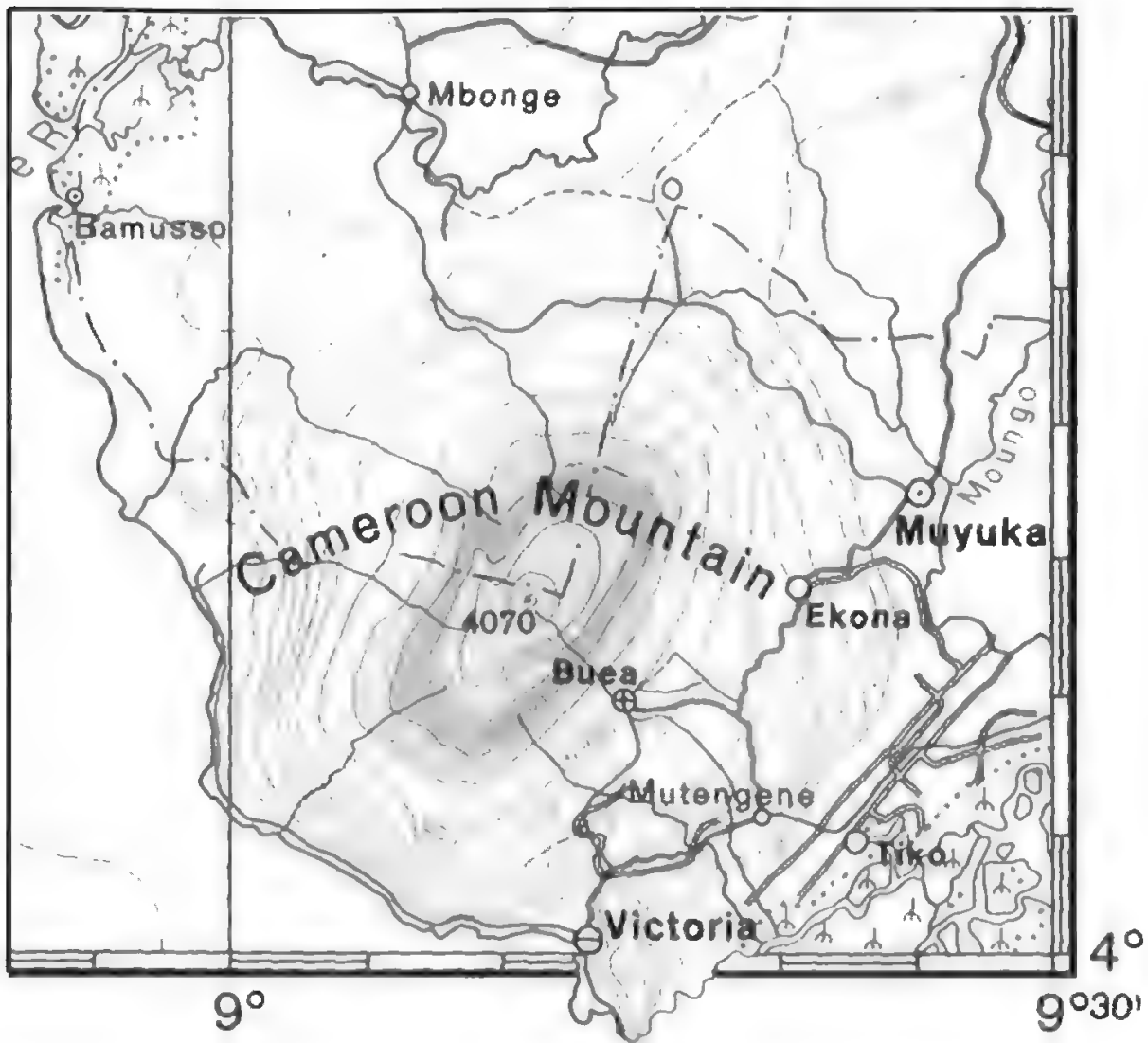
"One hears a great deal in West Africa of the 3,000 feet line as being the limit of the region of malarial fever, but I do not think this is anything more than a theoretical idea, and indeed there are few situations in West Africa besides Mungo, where the theory could be put to the test. Buea and De Buncha, Mr Thomson's sanatorium site, are at about this elevation. Buea has not yet had sufficient trial as a health resort to speak of it finally, but the great prevalence there of phagedaenic ulcers does not lead one to regard the air as healthy.

"I regard this idea of the possibility of finding an elevated situation in West Africa suitable for a sanatorium, as one of the most dangerous the

governmental authorities suffer from, for it induces them to build houses in out of-the-way places, and send men suffering from fever to them to die, robbing the sick man of his great chance of recovery, namely, getting out to sea. The true sanatorium for the Coast would be a hospital vessel attached to each district, but as this is practically impossible, the next best thing would be for the indefatigable Mr A.L. Jones and Messrs Elder Dempster to have a special hospital cabin on every one of their vessels."

Leaving Victoria on the *Nachtigal*, the yacht of the German Governor of Cameroon, Herr von Puttkamer, Mary Kingsley's journey to Calabar was largely uneventful – save for bumping into a whale. The Governor, on a passing visit, wasn't keen to stay long, Victoria "being too unhealthy a place for the Governor to stay in after a severe illness". While in Calabar, Mary Kingsley visited Mary Slessor, the Dundee-born missionary who had come out to Africa in 1876 and was now working in Okyön, before departing on the *Bakana* for Sierra Leone. That journey, though, brought its own sadness:

"We had a comfortable voyage up to Sierra Leone, where a gloom fell over the whole ship from the death of the purser, Mr Crompton. It was one of those terribly, sudden, hopeless cases of Coast fever, so common on the West Coast, where no man knows from day to day whether he or those round him will not, before a few hours are over, be



in the grip of malarial fever, on his way to the grave."

It is not known whether George Thomson's building survives, or whether it has been destroyed with the growth of the township or as a result of the frequent tremors from Mt Cameroon. Today, travel guides describe Buea as "a sleepy place", offering "a refreshingly cool climate and an invigorating 3000m (10,000ft) climb up Mt Cameroon", usually now accomplished in

two days, but sometimes in one.

The town did have moments of short-lived glory: it became the capital of the German protectorate from 1901-1909, and shortly after independence, Buea became the capital of Western Cameroon, a distinction only lasted 11 years before Yaounde was named the sole capital. However, Buea remains the administrative capital of South West Province and the heart of English-

speaking Cameroon, which focuses on the south-west of the country. With its population of 100,000, Buea's volcanic soil supports "lush vegetation, rose gardens, ... quaint little houses [and] schools", its main sight being "the rustic English charm of the Mountain Hotel".

Living on the side of a volcano has its perils, however: Mount Cameroon – "the Chariot of the Gods" – has erupted six times this century, the last in 1999.

Thoughts on Thomson

Professor James Stevens Curl adds to the discussion on 'Greek' Thomson in relation to St Vincent Street Church

THE THOUGHTFUL paper by Edward Taylor on the 'Sacred and Aesthetic Principles' of Thomson in the *Newsletter* is to be welcomed. Debate and discussion are always healthy things in intellectual life: shut minds and dogmatic positions are unhealthy and deplorable.

I am certain that Thomson's architecture, and especially his church architecture, draws on concepts of associations, influenced by the writings of Archibald Alison (1757-1838), the existence of which he himself acknowledges in his first Haldane Lecture. Alison's *Essays on Taste* had been through six editions by 1825, and numerous Scots were deeply affected by his work, including John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843), whose own copious publications are steeped in Alisonian themes. The lost Temple in Jerusalem was not only sought by Freemasons, but would have impinged upon any reasonably well-read man (or woman) of the time, especially those interested in buildings, religion, and architecture (and Thomson was unquestionably interested in all three).

It is perfectly reasonable to see St Vincent Street Church as not just a building: it is far more than that. Certainly it is a great work of architecture (only a philistine could ever think otherwise), but it is so strange, so original, so brilliant that it is (to me, at any rate), even more

than that, and I propose it is nothing less than a mnemonic of the lost Temple of Solomon itself. Mr Taylor is absolutely right, in my opinion, to draw John Martin (1789-1854) into the frame, for, although many might regard his apocalyptic visions and Biblical subjects with distaste, they were widely admired during his lifetime, notably in France, in Belgium – he was knighted by King Leopold I in 1833 – and in America – where he influenced artists such as Thomas Cole (1801-48). His work was not only collected, but widely familiar through engravings.

Unfortunately Martin was denounced by Ruskin, who regarded his paintings as vulgar and sensationalist, and he was also dismissed as 'Mad Martin', though it was not he, but his brother, Jonathan, who managed to burn down York Minster in an iconoclastic frenzy. However, Ruskin and Thomson were definitely not in the same camp, and in my view the orientalising top to the St Vincent Street tower is a deliberate allusion to something Biblical and Antique, showing certain affinities with architectural inventions by Martin intended to suggest buildings of the Middle East in pre-Christian times.

At St Vincent Street too there are those amazing capitals inside the church and the great platform itself, both of which surely allude to the Temple's 'chapiters of lily-work' and the



platform on which the Temple stood. I also think that an analysis of the disposition of the internal volumes of the Church (and their external expression) shows that Thomson's masterpiece owes not a little to descriptions of the lost Temple and to various published reconstructions of it (some of which I illustrate in my *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry* [1991]). However, that is something future researchers could examine, using computer techniques, overlays, and comparative proportional systems. I have proposed the hypothesis: somebody younger can test the theory.

There is more to St Vincent Street Church (and to much else of Thomson's work) than meets the late-twentieth-century eye. Besides, we should not look at the building from the ignorant, utilitarian, unimaginative, uninformed, and often fatuous positions of 2000, but with at least a modicum of an attempt to understand it in the context of the time and place in which it was conceived.

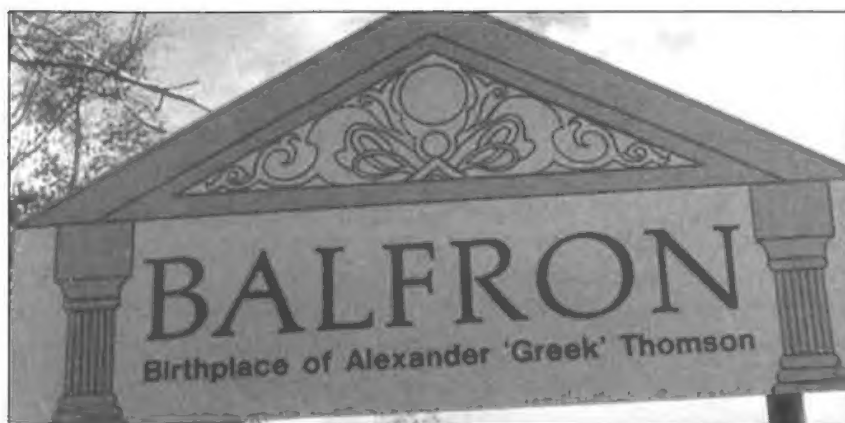
Benches in Balfron

Peter Craig reports on a new initiative in Thomson's birthplace

BALFRON Community Futures Group came into existence together with three other rural communities in Stirlingshire as part of the Community Futures Stirling programme. Established in 1999 as a community-led project to shape and influence the development of village, the aim is to help communities plan their own future, and then develop the projects and actions identified through that process.

One of Balfron Community Futures' sub-groups looked at the issue of access and open spaces in the village; that led to a link with heritage issues in Balfron and has now led to the design, construction and siting of eight benches around the village, all derived from Thomsonian themes, developed and manufactured in the local Iron Horse Studios.

Each bench has a central medallion featuring an aspect of the village's history; Thomson's profile, mill waterwheel, weaving, spinning, a salmon, a wolf, Caledonia Road Church and an aeroplane (celebrating Barnwell of Blenheim bomber fame). The result has been a great success and created real interest in the locality as a way of making heritage visible – and comfortable as well. The money for the scheme, £9000, came from The Paul Trust, the Stirling Landfill Tax Trust, Stirling Council's Millennium Fund and LEADER II funds from the EU.



One of the spin-offs from this success is that Balfron Community Futures are now planning to set up a development trust with the aim to convert surplus council offices (already offered) into a

small mixed-use community facility.

A leaflet on the village is available from Balfron Community Futures, 43 Dunkeld Court, Balfron, Glasgow G63 0LT.

A note on Thomson and Gilbert Scott

GREEK THOMSON'S sensational attack on the Gothic Revival in general and George Gilbert Scott's designs for the new University buildings on Gilmorehill in particular was a lecture read to the Glasgow Architectural Society on 7th May 1866. Its title was 'An Enquiry as to whether the Character and Purpose of the University can be fully expressed in Mediaeval Architecture – and whether the merits of the proposed Plans have justified the University Authorities in going from home for an architect'.

It has long been assumed that part of Thomson's grievance against the University for going to a smart London architect without competition was the fact that he had worked as an assistant on John Baird's abortive schemes of 1845-47 for resiting the institution at Woodlands, but the precise context of Thomson's public attack has not been investigated.

Note 1 to the text of Thomson's lecture on page 87 of *The Light of Truth and Beauty* records that Jacinta Feltis had discovered that the 'Glasgow College Removal - Minute Book of Building Committee of Senate' [GUA 17146] records that on 2nd February 1866 Scott (*above, right*) had written from London to the Convenor, Professor Allen Thomson, M.D., thanking him "for your letter to Mr Thomson", which suggests

that 'Greek' Thomson had first approached the University privately after seeing Scott's initial designs on display in the Royal Exchange. Miss Feltis has now sent us a fuller transcription from this document.

This suggests that the University was apprehensive about public criticism of Scott's Gothic design. The transcription of the letter to Professor Allen Thomson from Scott's London office – 20 Spring Gardens, London S.W. – dated February 2nd 1866, begins "My Dear Sir / I thank you much for your letter to Mr Thomson..." and then, after a discussion about finding a clerk of works and recommending "Mr Anderson of Edinburgh" concludes

"Perhaps you will kindly tell me a little of the nature of the 'Exposition' which you asked me to give. – I am really rather alarmed at the idea of having to volunteer an advocacy of my own design!"

In his reply, dated 10th February 1866, Allen Thomson wrote that

"I regret that I cannot yet mention the precise day for our *Conversazione* as fixed. – I do not think it will be before Wednesday the 14th of March, and it is likely to be either about the 15th or 22nd. You need not be in any concern as to the lecture. – At such a meeting a very short one only is suitable, and no defence of your plans will be required as I see they are gaining more & more general approval! But rather I should

point to an short exposition which you are accustomed or think proper to give with illustrations of your principles; and from this you can easily lead on if you think fit to any remarks you may wish to make on our building. I feel sure that your being present will give very great satisfaction..."

Perhaps Scott's claim that he was fusing the "noble architecture" of 16th century Scotland with 14th century French architecture which Thomson quoted in his lecture [page 79] was made at that *Conversazione*, assuming that it took place. Thomson's devastating rebuttal followed soon after.

Allen Thomson, who did so much to thwart his eponymous architect critic, gave the Haldane Lectures in 1873 – the year before Thomson delivered his – on the subject of "Artistic Anatomy". And a further copy letter from Scott in the Minute Book reveals that the "Mr Anderson of Edinburgh" he recommended to be Clerk of Works was none other than his former assistant, the future Sir Robert Rowand Anderson, as

"My knowledge of him is derived from his having superintended for me the erection of a Church and house at Leith, which he has done notwithstanding some difficulties arising from a very unwilling Contractor..." [for which see Sam McKinstry's *Rowand Anderson: The premier architect of Scotland*, Edinburgh University Press, 1991].

Save almost 50% on 'The Light of Truth and Beauty'

Alexander Thomson's public lectures, including his Haldane Lectures on art and architecture and his sensational attack on Gilbert Scott's Gothic design for Glasgow University, are here for the first time brought together here in a single volume. They reveal him as a powerful and eloquent speaker, and confirm that not only was he one of the most original architects of his time, but also that his was one of the greatest minds in Scottish architecture.

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The Newsletter

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2001 Winter Lectures

This year's Winter Lectures take place in the First Floor Lecture Theatre at the Mackintosh School of Architecture, in the Bourdon Building, Renfrew Street, Glasgow (*adjacent to Glasgow School of Art*).

Wednesday 7th February

Dominic d'Angelo: *Thomson's smarter brother – and other family members*

Wednesday 14th February

Professor Andy MacMillan: *Thomson and his relevance today*

Wednesday 21st February

James Macaulay: *James Playfair and Cairness House*

Wednesday 28th February

David Walker: *John Honeyman*

Lectures start at 7.00pm. Lectures are free to members, £2 to non-members.

The Alexander Thomson Society Committee

AT THE Annual General Meeting held in November, Dr Gavin Stamp was re-elected Chairman of the Society for a further three-year term. Dominic d'Angelo was re-elected Hon. Secretary, Irene Stewart re-elected Hon. Treasurer, and Lesley Kerr re-elected as Minutes Secretary.

The following members of the Committee were re-elected: Mark H. Baines, Alan McCartney, Matthew Merrick, Sandy Stoddart.

The following members of the Society were co-opted onto the Committee: Edward Taylor, Richard Myall, Colin McCluskey, Graeme Arnott, Robert Stewart.

Frances Manley was elected as external examiner of the Society's accounts.

The continuing members of the Committee are: Roger Guthrie, Pippy McEwen, Professor Sam McKinstry, Mary Miers, Graeme Shearer.

The Society's Patrons are The Earl of Glasgow, Professor Andor Gomme and Professor Andrew MacMillan.



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